THE HUMANITY OF SIR THOMAS BROWNE

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IN an address on Sir Thomas Browne delivered at Guy's Hospital in London forty-six years ago, Sir William Osler appealed to "the compassionate feeling with which the bibliomaniac is regarded by his saner colleagues." Frankly confessing an unbounded enthusiasm for my subject, I must also solicit the kindly tolerance which the medical profession has always shown towards human aberrations – of which it daily sees so many. I recall vividly the occasion when a distinguished member of this group, Dr. Eli Moschcowitz, permitted me – a perfect stranger – to examine some of his precious copies of Sir Thomas Browne, recognizing instantly and sympathetically one whose passion for old books was past redemption. Perhaps it is presumptuous of a layman lacking Osler's extensive learning to speak to physicians of a physician, but since many medical persons have written on literary subjects, a student of literature may venture to discuss a physician who was very literary indeed.

The many rare volumes in the Osler collection, like those in the famous library of this Academy, are constant reminders that the history of medicine is a history of medical men—their failures and their achievements, their follies and their insights, their ignorance and their wisdom. Osler well knew that in the art of healing the physician deals with humanity, to whom nothing is alien, where the boundaries between mind and matter are obscure. His interest in Sir Thomas Browne went deeper than mere delight in the "quaintness" which captivated the nineteenth century critics. In his library the Browne collection is given an honored place beside the niche containing, in the words of Dr. William Francis, "Osler's adjacent ashes." For in Thomas Browne, Osler found a good and true friend with a "deep human interest in human beings." *Religio Medici,* he stated quite simply, "is the most precious book in my library."

When we turn the pages of this little volume, we recall that it was published in the fateful year 1642, when the clash of arms at Edgehill sounded the beginning of open war between Parliament and Crown. The uncertainties of our times may seem no more ominous to us than those violent struggles seemed to peace-loving Englishmen three hundred years ago. Into a tumultuous atmosphere came this doctor's confession of faith, quietly enough, without fanfare, in a drab little octavo that is now prized by collectors. Readers discovered, as we discover today, that here was a lively personality who believed in God, in his fellow-men, and in himself. The author's name did not appear on the title page, for the book had been published surreptitiously. But his profession, and the paradox inherent in the title, attracted immediate attention. In those days many supposed that a physician, who presumed to tamper with God's handiwork, must somehow be in league with the powers of darkness.

The story of *Religio Medici*'s meteoric fame is well known. The widespread interest it first aroused grew into a storm of controversy. The energetic Sir Kenelm Digby sat up all night reading it, and wrote his *Observations*, which were soon published and prompted Browne to come out with "a true and full copy of that which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously printed before under the name of *Religio Medici*." The book became a true best-seller. It was translated into several languages, excited admiration on the Continent, and gave rise to a host of imitations, so that today Mr. Geoffrey Keynes can enumerate eighty-five religios of all sorts—from *Religio Laici* to *Religio Obstetrici*. Browne did not rest on his early fame as the celebrated author of a popular essay; he continued to write, and in his longest book, *Enquiries into Vulgar Errors*, attempted a large-scale examination of popular beliefs. This work was a forerunner of the new investigations which were to be carried on by the Royal Society. Other minor writings appeared, including that masterpiece of English prose, *Urn Burial*, containing reflections on life, death, and immortality in some of the loveliest and most solemn passages in the English language.

It used to be the fashion to characterize Sir Thomas Browne as a dreamy antiquarian, withdrawn from the busy world and oblivious to what was taking place around him. However, his correspondence shows that he was nothing of the sort. It is full of comments on local doings and events in England and abroad. But even if this correspondence had

not survived, we should know that Browne was no recluse, because for nearly half a century he carried on an extensive medical practice as a general practitioner in the city of Norwich. Dr. Browne was probably more familiar with the human concerns and daily activities of his fellow men than many of his more worldly contemporaries. Moreover, he was in his own time eminent in his profession—"much resorted to by his patients for his admirable skill in Physick," as an Oxford biographer put it. He was made a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, of which his son Edward later become president.

Browne had received his medical training at the most advanced schools on the Continent—Montpellier, Padua, and Leyden, and was always keenly interested in anything new. To be sure there is a certain bookishness about his medical comments, as there is about much in seventeenth century culture, but he was at least as advanced as many of his contemporaries, and more alert and ready to experiment than most. Towards Harvey he was enthusiastic, and preferred his account of the circulation of the blood to the discovery of Columbus. He nevertheless poked fun at Harvey for having written excellently on generation, while having no offspring of his own. Sydenham's book, *De Febre Putrida,* he pronounced "well writ." Famous names appear in Browne's correspondence—Glisson, Ent, Lower, Highmore, Charleton, and Mayow. In 1667 he asked his son to try at Calais to "get a box of the Jesuits powder at easie rate & bring it back in the bark, not in powder." In a reply to an inquiry about the efficacy of quinine he sensibly stated that he had seen no bad effects from its use, though it "doth not so much good as I could wish." He scoffed at physicians who diagnose all ailments by examining urine, as if it were "the Oracle of life, the great determinator of Virginity, Conception, Fertility, and the inscrutable infirmaties of the whole Body." He was doubtful about bloodletting, and surmised that it must be less valuable than purging, "since in the Generall purging cures more diseases," and since, "there are so few hints for bleeding from any naturall attempt" in animals. Of the use of antimony he was sceptical, and proposed that "an exact and critical trial" be demanded by the public.

But more interesting to me—and safer ground—is the continuing thoughtful interest Browne shows in his patients. His letters to his son Edward practicing in London reveal him as a wise practitioner who knew something of the rudiments of psychotherapy, combined patience

with shrewd common sense, and had genuine concern for those in his care. For one patient he described the treatment successfully given another, with the cautious reservation: "Butt there is a great disparity in your constitutions and purging medicine hee used will not bee proper for you."

He writes Edward of a Mrs. Suckling, who is complaining of a "vehement payne in the legge" and is coming to London to consult a surgeon about an ulcer in her nose. "I had no reason to conjecture," he explains, that there was anything suggesting syphilis, "shee beeing a vertuous good woeman." "Shee is likely to bee in great perplexity if you should positively tell her. . . ." "Pray have a speciall care of her for shee is a very good person."

Also to consult Edward is "Mr. Alderman Wisse": "a meticulous doubting man of a good nature . . . seldome without thoughts to perplex himself & making his life the more uncomfortable . . . I am fayne to compose him sometimes by good counsell and rationall argument; the truth is hee is a very honest inoffensive person & his owne foe most."

Of a Mr. Hasset, Sir Thomas cautions: "hee intendeth to marry, and hath settled affection upon a good gentlewoeman. . . . I would have you to vewe the penis diligently. . . . for hee is very Jealous and apt to bee meticulous, and is hypochondricall."

"Mr. Payne of St. Gyles" is to come to London. "You must have good patience, for hee abounds in questions & doubts, & is soone discouraged & apt to laye hold of any words & to argue agaynst himself or any remedies."

We hear also of physicians' own troubles. "Extraordinarie sickly seasons woorie physitions, and robbeth them of their health as well as their quiet." "Therefore," he advises Edward, "have a great care of your health. . . . which may bee by Temperance and sobrietie and a good competence of sleepe. Take heed that Tobacco gayne not to much upon you." In his later years Sir Thomas himself felt increasingly the strain of keeping up his practice and confessed: "I am fayne to keep my self warme by a fire side this cold wether."

Of Browne's various writings that which most strikingly blends medical and human interest is an essay describing the death of a young man suffering from phthisis. Entitled *A Letter to A Friend*, it was printed in folio from among Browne's posthumous papers, and is now an excessively rare book. Recently the young man has been identified

as Robert Loveday, a poet who had been in correspondence with Sir Thomas. The remarkable thing about this little tract, which Walter Pater preferred above all Browne's other works, is that its raw material was an actual case from the physician's notebook. Dr. Browne saw that death was inevitable and so informed the patient's relatives. Noticing that the stricken man had once suffered from rickets, Browne pauses to remark that it would be worth knowing whether the children of English planters abroad suffered from the same disease. He comments on the patient's beard and thick hair, then recalls observing, when a student at Montpellier, "that Endemial Distemper of little children in Languedock, called the Morgellons"—a skin ailment described obscurely in a number of medical books of that time. He states that he was not surprised to find that "two Lobes of his Lungs adhered unto his side; for the like I have often found in Bodies of no suspected Consumptions or difficulty of Respiration. And the same more often happeneth in Men than other Animals: and some think in Women than in Men."

But all this and other acute observations combine, in this "elfin essay" as Pater called it, with fascinating digressions. Every impression, every symptom of death leads to an imaginative speculation. The end of physical existence—the final dissolution—has a powerful effect on his imagination. He muses over the patient's dreams. The gradual change in the young man's countenance leads to queries about physiognomy. The hour of death calls forth a digression on the significance of dying on one's own birthday—which is exactly what happened to Sir Thomas himself. The thought of "the mighty Nations of the Dead" evokes rich and poetic phrases: "He left this World not very many days past, yet every hour you know largely addeth unto that dark Society."

The personality of Sir Thomas Browne can be discovered not only in his medical observations but also in his miscellaneous comments, which display a restless, wide-ranging curiosity. These notes, probably kept late at night when the last patient had been dismissed, may be read in his nervous and distinctive handwriting in the British Museum, where Browne's papers were deposited by another distinguished physician, naturalist, and collector, Sir Hans Sloane. Here is a sample:

> To find out a body that will precipitate salt in a solution of water. . . . Wheat sprouteth up within a fortnight or 3 weeks after it bee sowed. . . . Trie

> therefore whether sowne in April it will not come to perfection that yeare. This performed—wheat sowne in April came up well, thick, spindled late, eared late. . . . To manifest how lasting the seminall principles of bodyes are, how long they will lye uncorrupted in the earth. . . . Litle red wormes and lesse than threads are found in great numbers in diches & muddy places where the water is almost forsaken. . . . To observe whether in fearfull animals as the hare, doe, &c. the crystallyne humor of the eye bee more turgide whereby objects seeme greater unto them. . . . 3 grains of opium workes strongly upon a dogge. Observe howe much will take place with an horse, wch subsisteth with litle sleepe. . . . 4 unto a crowe without visible effect. . . . 6 & 8 unto dogges making them dull, not profoundly to sleepe. . . . 2 grains given a pickerell above a quarter long dyed in twelve howers, floted not; another whoe had nothing given survived.

Dr. Johnson, who was a great admirer of Sir Thomas, once asserted that any sort of knowledge is worth acquiring, and Browne himself certainly seems to have thought so. His old friend Whitefoot declared that he seemed to have been ordained by Divine Providence to be "Surveyor-General of the whole terrestrial Orb." The names of most of Browne's leading contemporaries in science appear in his writings. He read eagerly the publications of Harvey, Descartes, Hooke, and Boyle. In early middle age, fourteen years before the Royal Society was organized, he suggested the possibility of "cooperating advancers" of learning, and in his seventies advised his son Edward to notice Leeuwenhoek's observations of spermatozoa.

Browne inclined toward the biological sciences, especially in his later years, and he was profoundly aware of the central problem which has challenged the best minds of every age—the nature of man. Today new explorations into the complexities of the nervous system and the insights of modern psychology have increased our knowledge but have deepened our perplexity. In Browne's time men puzzled over the question of the inorganic soul. In the human skull "there is not any thing of moment more," he observed, "than I can discover in the crany of a beast . . . thus we are men, and we know not how." Yet he never permitted his "haggard and unreclaimed reason" to lure him down the path to utter materialism. The uncompromising reduction of all things to naturalistic concepts, so appealing to a Hobbes, a Huxley, or a Freud, seemed to Browne neither valid nor adequate as an account of man and the universe. What he could discern with his own eyes turned his "Philosophy into Divinity." "There is," he wrote, "in these works of nature, which seem to puzzle reason, something Divine, and hath more in it than the eye of a common spectator doth discover." Nor was this

simply the wish-fulfillment of a naive theist. He had pondered deeply the question of generation, and had spent hours watching duckweed in water in the hope of fathoming the mysterious process of growth. The egg – the seed – seemed to him, as to us, dramatic mysteries, suggestive of the unknown force that seems to lie behind all living things. To observe the process of generation he said "were a sight beyond all." It is a "great work whose wonders are only second unto those of the Creation and a close apprehension of the one, might perhaps afford a glimmering light, and crepusculous glance of the other."

Although Browne did not live to witness the complete triumph of the principles of Newtonian physics, which were to dominate man's thinking for two centuries, he could have accepted them readily because of their suggestion of a majestic universal order. Like his contemporaries, he conceived of the visible world as a static affair. Yet he was extraordinarily conscious of the relativity of time, and was impressed by the paradox that man, with his pitifully short span of years, is yet aware of the eternal and infinite. Browne was irresistibly drawn to thoughts of antiquity. The grand sweep of the centuries, the majestic flow of "time that grows old in itself" and "makes all that is past a moment" haunted his meditations. Thoughts of ancient times stirred his imagination. Homer and Plato were table companions, Alexander and Caesar next-door neighbors, and the first drama of mankind in Paradise was enacted not so long ago. But he saw it all as if enveloped in a veil which the mind of man cannot pierce.

Browne amused himself with predictions and in some doggerel verses actually foretold things to come: the end of the slave trade, the rise of America to world dominance, trade in the Pacific, American armies in Europe, and even the subjugation of China by "a new drove of Tartars." In another place he proposed the digging of the Panama Canal. But he himself did not take his prophecies seriously, and once observed: "if you have a mind to laugh at a man, or disparage the judgment of any one, sett him a talking of things to come . . . wherein men seem to talk butt as babes would do in the womb of their mother, of the things of the world which they are entering into." Sir Thomas usually preferred to glance back down the stream of time, and expected revelation of the future only in dark hints. Some, Browne remarked in *A Letter to a Friend*, might wish to have lived in past ages, but "the uncertainty of future times hath tempted few to make a part in Ages

to come. And surely, he that hath . . . rightly calculated the degenerate state of this Age, is not likely to envy those that shall live in the next, much less three or four hundred years hence."

We who live almost exactly three hundred years later may wonder whether, despite the vast increases in our knowledge, we are living better than our seventeenth-century ancestors. Certainly in human conduct and understanding we have not advanced beyond the sane and balanced outlook of Sir Thomas Browne, who at the end of his essay leaves medical and psychological considerations to affirm that length of life is less important than the values by which life is lived. The dying young man had "already fulfilled the prime and longest Intention of his Being: and one day lived after the perfect Rule of Piety, is to be preferred before sinning Immortality."

Sir Thomas Browne had a kind of double vision. He saw the world as the handiwork of an all-powerful creator challenging man to explore its secrets, and at the same time as a hieroglyph concealing its deepest meaning. To lay open the fabric of the human body, to explore the earth, or to study the stars is no impiety but rather a means of honoring God's wisdom. But man's powers are limited. One may glimpse, but not grasp, the absolute:

> "In vayne wee seeke to satisfy our soules in narrow theories & close apprehensions of the divine essence. . . . The divine revelation in such poynts being not framed unto intellectualls of earth."

To the early Christian, intent on the world to come, this life is but a corridor through which man walks to his death. To many others this life is all-important. Sir Thomas Browne resolved the two points of view. Though he pronounced man "that great and true Amphibium" living "in divided and distinguished worlds," he found no conflict between the two worlds. His belief in a higher being served not to lessen his concern for humanity but to strengthen it. Though he could not truly understand man's nature, he did not conclude that it has no meaning. The fact of his own existence and the existence of his fellow-men seemed an overwhelming reason for living this life to its highest degree of fulfilment. He was moved to affirm rather than to deny. As a physician, whose daily concern was life and death, he was keenly aware of the helplessness and the dignity of man. The reconciling principle, he believed, is charity. *Religio Medici,* his earliest and most eloquent expression of his convictions, stands as one of the first great pleas for

tolerance. At a time when fanatic partisanship and unyielding prejudice seemed to dominate men's thinking, he confessed:

> I feel not in myself those common Antipathies that I can discover in others: those National repugnances do not touch me.

When harsh reformers were condemning all who opposed them, he calmly observed:

> No man can justly censure another, because indeed no man Truly knows another. . . . No man can judge another because no man knows himself.

In an age when doctors were often more concerned with their patients' fees than with their welfare, he entreated:

> Let me be sick myself, if sometimes the malady of my patient be not a disease unto me; I desire rather to cure his infirmities than my own necessities.

A note in his commonplace books contains his private reminder: "To pray dayly and particularly for sick patients. . . . Upon sight of beautiful persons to blesse god in his creatures."

Sir Thomas Browne managed his own daily responsibilities with good sense and practicality, yet felt God's nearness to every act of daily life and believed that "surely there is a piece of Divinity in us." To the logical minds of the eighteenth century, such a man did not appeal. They dropped into cold, rationalistic pronouncements on the subject of life and death. The breathless hush which had fallen on the author of *Urn Burial* was broken by the clamor of reasoning theologians. Under the searching glare of their analytical minds the delicate hues of Browne's imagination were indiscernible.

But in the next century, and in our own, the warm humanity of Sir Thomas Browne has been rediscovered. Long before Osler, a spirit kindred to Browne's, Charles Lamb, responded to the rare humor, keen intellect, and warm charity in Browne's writings. A famous conversation has been recorded, in which someone asked Lamb what men in history he would most wish to have seen:

> On the question being started, Ayrton said, "I suppose the two first persons you would choose to see would be the two greatest names in English literature, Sir Isaac Newton and Mr. Locke?" . . . Everyone burst out laughing at the expression of Lamb's face, in which impatience was restrained by courtesy. "Yes, the greatest names," he stammered out hastily, "but they were not persons—not persons." . . . Lamb then named Sir Thomas Browne and Fulke Greville, the friend of Sir Philip Sidney, as the two worthies he should feel the greatest pleasure to encounter on the floor of his apartment in their night-gown and slippers, and to exchange friendly greetings with them.

Browne was indeed a person, and would have been amused at Lamb's desire to exchange greetings with him. He once wrote in his notebooks:

> "I cannot fancy unto myself a more acceptable representation or state of things then if I could see all my best freinds, and worthy acquaintance of fortie yeares last past, upon the stage of the world at one time."

Here, then, is our humane physician: scientist, antiquarian, and author, deeply religious and wisely tolerant – eminently a man of good will. Though his fame is rather in the annals of literature than the history of medicine, the medical profession may own him proudly. In the most difficult of all tasks – that of living one's life with courage, kindness, and wisdom – he conspicuously succeeded. But his service to mankind has transcended his own lifetime. It has continued through three centuries in the pages of *Religio Medici*, where many generations of readers – laymen and physicians alike – have discovered the humanity of Sir Thomas Browne.